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SUBJECT: POLITICAL PARTIES IN CROATIA - ELECTION PRIMER,
CHAPTER TWO

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¶1. (C) Croatia's transition from socialism through war and finally towards integration in Euro-Atlantic institutions has led to a proliferation of political parties. Fully sixteen parties are now represented in Croatia's parliament and still others hope to win seats in the next Sabor. Some of these parties were created when larger parties split; others are regional parties in semi-permanent coalition with national-level parties.

¶2. (C) As the November 23 date for parliamentary elections draws near, all of these parties are either recasting themselves to appeal to as many voters as possible or are trying to align themselves with likely coalition partners to ensure they break the five-percent vote threshold to qualify for seats in the next parliament and thereby ensure their political survival. This cable is intended to serve as a reference. Taken together with a primer on political personalities (ref) and an upcoming guide to Croatia's electoral rules, we hope it will be useful for those following Croatia's political race.

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Parties Now in Opposition
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Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ)

¶3. (C) The HDZ of today bears little resemblance to the corrupt, nationalist machine of founder Franjo Tudjman, but is a long, long way from becoming "Croatia's Republican Party" as party president Ivo Sanader tries to portray it. Although he won the presidency of the HDZ in 2000, Sanader waited until 2002 to begin a ruthless purge of his rivals in the party. Sanader portrays the purge as "democratization," but the main standard used to decide who stayed or went in the HDZ was personal loyalty. The HDZ damaged whatever pro-Europe credibility it had when it did not vote to ratify Croatia's Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU in 2001. Moreover, few observers believe that an HDZ government would readily cooperate with ICTY requests to surrender "Croatia's heroes" like PIFWC Ante Gotovina or support the calls of the international community on refugee return. Sanader and a handful of other modern-looking politicians represent a thin veneer of respectability covering up the same old crowd of crony nationalists (absent a few of the most rotten apples). Sanader is desperate to lead the HDZ back to government and would consider a deal with practically any party to get there.

¶4. (C) The HDZ has a rock-solid electorate, mainly rural, and relatively uneducated. Consistently the highest-polling party, the HDZ also leads the "party I'd never vote for" category, and IRI pollsters opine that the HDZ has topped out at 30 percent. More loyal even than Cubs fans, HDZ voters would turn out rain or shine; an election with low turnout would help the HDZ.

Croatian Social Liberal Party (HSLS)

¶5. (C) Under the imperious Drazen Budisa's leadership, the HSLS went from being the second most important party in Croatia to the brink of political irrelevance in less than three years. The HSLS is now fighting its way back again, but only as a member of the opposition. Budisa's egotistical, absolutist leadership brought about two destructive splits in the party; first Croatia's Liberal Party (LS) broke away and more recently a group of centrist MP's broke away to form the "Libra" party and keep a Budisa hissy fit from bringing down the Racan government. Now, the HSLS' main policy platform seems to be "get Racan" and Budisa seems ready to make any deal to avenge himself on the SDP. Without the balance of the eight MP's who left to form Libra, the HSLS has become more reactionary than the HDZ and would oppose any cooperation with ICTY which would impugn the "dignity of the homeland war."

16. (C) The HSLS formed a pre-election coalition with the Democratic Center, a group which broke away from the HDZ in 2000. Although observers are shocked by this "unnatural" alliance (Budisa was persecuted by the Tudjman government), polls suggest this was a canny political move. While the HSLS and DC were separately polling at three and two percent respectively, together they poll more than nine percent, much greater than the sum of their parts.

Democratic Center (DC)

17. (C) Mate Granic, who was Tudjman's Foreign Minister for most of that regime, broke away from the HDZ to form DC with two other less-nationalist MP's after the elections of 2000. Granic expected the HDZ to self-destruct after being thrown from office and wanted to give conservative, but not nationalist, HDZ members an option. But when the HDZ held together, the DC never got off the ground. Through tireless work, Granic has built a party infrastructure in most parts of Croatia, using his personal name recognition to keep DC's label in the public eye. Until recently, DC's polling numbers were disastrous (why vote for "HDZ-lite" when you can vote for the real thing?), but a coalition with Drazen Budisa's HSLS has made it likely that DC will break the five percent threshold and win seats in the next Sabor.

Croatian Party of Rights (HSP)

18. (C) Long the bastion of Croatia's extreme right-wing nationalists, the HSP may have damaged its faithful following by finally repudiating (in September 2003) Croatia's WWII fascist government. Until then, the "Ustashe" symbols and black-shirted thugs were welcome at HSP rallies. For most of the past three years, the HSP supported Sanader's assertions of party reform by making the HDZ look reasonable by comparison. With recent polls showing that the HSP might be needed to bring a right-wing government to power after elections, the HSP leader Anto Djapic is hastily getting rid of some of the nationalist trappings which would be most objectionable to the international community. Ironically, HSP MP Tonci Tadic is broadly considered to be the Croatian parliament's hardest-working and usually best-prepared MP.

Croatian Bloc (HB)

19. (C) When Ivic Pasalic, Tudjman's former hatchet man, was ejected from the HDZ after losing a close, bruising battle for the party presidency to Ivo Sanader, he formed the "Croatian Bloc" party to give his still-faithful followers a new political home. The experiment is failing despite Pasalic's eager infusions of cash, purportedly from secret offshore accounts. HB supporters are returning to the HDZ brand name, and Pasalic may not garner enough votes at the next election to win himself a seat in the Sabor. HB has staked out the ideological ground to the right of Sanader's HDZ (opposing any cooperation with ICTY, urging slower rapprochement with Serbia and Montenegro), but to the left of HSP. HB signed a pre-election coalition with Croatian True Revival (HIP).

Croatian True Revival (HIP)

110. (C) Dissatisfied with Sanader's leadership of his father's party, Miroslav Tudjman founded HiP as a political home for all those disappointed with the HDZ's 2000 loss. HiP did well in 2001 local elections, but soon fizzled, since it had little infrastructure and only Tudjman's name to trade on. HiP's role in its coalition with HB will be to provide Croatia's dimmest voters with another Tudjman to vote for.

Right-Wing Fringe Parties

111. (C) The extreme right-wing is littered with small parties trying to stake a claim to Croatia's most nationalist voters. Although some of these parties, like the Croatian Pure Party of Rights (HChSP) and the Croatian Christian Democratic Union (HKDU), will continue to win seats at the local level, it is very unlikely that any of them will again break the five-percent threshold to win seats in parliament.

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Parties Now in Government
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Social Democratic Party (SDP)

112. (C) Croatia's SDP has not gained strength from its three years as leader of the ruling coalition in government.

Although it has shed the ideology of its origins in Croatia's Party of Communists, the SDP retains some of its worst organizational aspects and still struggles to identify its own post-socialist political identity. In pursuing the government's reform agenda, the SDP has alienated some of its natural constituencies, particularly organized labor. As the election approaches, many Croatian voters identify the successes of the coalition government with the SDP's

coalition partners. The government's failures, however, seem to have stuck with the SDP, which catches the blame for foreign policy gaffes, reductions in the social safety net and (according to a recent poll) for being the cause of squabbles between coalition partners.

¶13. (C) While Croatia's other leading parties have updated and streamlined their leadership structure in advance of the election, the SDP has not. PM Ivica Racan maintains a firm hold on the party presidency, and together with a few party leaders like Defense Minister Zeljka Antunovic, Foreign Minister Tonino Picula and Labor Minister Davorko Vidovic, tries to present a modern, left-of-center image of a "normal" European Social Democratic party. But Racan did not take advantage of the SDP's time in government to bring new blood into the top ranks of the leadership and to retire some of the figures who look like throwbacks to SDP's communist roots.

¶14. (C) Other parties have cranked up their public-relations machines, but the SDP has yet to get going. Earlier polls suggested that the existing coalition had a comfortable margin; SDP focused its efforts on how to divide up ministerial portfolios rather than on the campaign. New polls show this was folly; the SDP's inaction has given the opposition a running start. It may not be too late, however, since polls suggest that the biggest block of undecided voters are overwhelmingly young and female. This is where the SDP needs to focus if it wants to gain ground in the sprint to elections.

¶15. (C) The SDP has signed a pre-election coalition agreement with the Istrian Democratic Union (IDS). This tactical alliance will probably help the two parties corner most of the votes in Istria, Croatia's most highly-developed region, but has put the noses of some SDP faithful out of joint.

Croatian People's Party (HNS)

¶16. (C) With its urban, professional appeal, the HNS has grown significantly since elections in 2000. Despite its small representation in the parliament (only two seats), the HNS probably benefited most from being in government. Public Works Minister Radimir Cacic (HNS) gets most of the credit for a popular highway project and while President Mesic by law had to resign from the HNS when he took office, HNS strategists never let the public forget where the popular president's political roots are. HNS is left-of-center and appeals most to younger, educated voters, which puts it in competition for the same electorate with which SDP seeks to improve its standing. Conflicts with the SDP, especially in the Zagreb city council, have spoiled an otherwise productive relationship. HNS has signed pre-election coalition agreements with two much smaller regional parties, one near Rijeka, the other in the eastern part of Croatia. These agreements will help both the regional parties and HNS win seats in contested districts. Some say that HNS has not done enough to build a party infrastructure outside of Zagreb.

Croatian Peasants' Party (HSS)

¶17. (C) As Croatia's third-largest party, the HSS has grown used to the gravy that being "kingmaker" in the coalition brings. Its core constituency is (naturally) rural, older, and churchgoing. Party President (and parliament speaker) Zlatko Tomcic rules the party with an iron hand in all respects, from policy choices to personnel. While the HSS has in general been a loyal coalition partner, it has prevented the GoC from moving forward in some aspects of privatization. Although it is a strong supporter of the GoC's bid for EU membership, it has taken a back seat on foreign policy choices. The HSS presents itself as a right-of-center party, and has a party platform similar to that of Christian Democrats elsewhere in Europe. But HSS critics say that the HSS has no ideology; it is only in government for what it can get out of it for itself and its constituents.

¶18. (C) The HSS reorganized itself into regional subunits well in advance of elections and has been running a modern, American-style campaign at the grass roots. The HSS declared months ago that it will not form any pre-election coalitions. While HSS party leaders tell us privately that they would

not plan on entering a coalition with the HDZ, most believe the HSS would go with whichever side offered them the best deal.

Libra

¶19. (C) Libra broke away from the HSLS in June 2002 when a group of eight MPs chose to stay with the Racan government rather than force early elections. With no time to develop an effective national-level infrastructure and no soldiers to serve the eight "generals" who lead the party, Libra will not make it into the next Sabor unless PM Racan chooses to reward its loyalty by including a few Libra leaders on SDP's list of candidates. Libra's centrist, academic approach is effective in parliament, but useless in an election campaign.

Regional Parties

¶20. (C) Istrian Democratic Union (IDS). The IDS has run Croatia's western, most developed county since independence, despite Tudjman's attempts to displace it with the HDZ. The IDS still polls higher than any other party in Istria, but party leadership has been tainted by scandal. The IDS generally supports progressive policies at the national level, and has championed minority rights in the parliament (Istria has a significant Italian minority). The IDS has signed a pre-election coalition agreement (valid only for Istria) with the SDP.

¶21. (C) Primorsko Goranski Union(PGS). A micro-party in Rijeka, Croatia's third-largest city, the PGS' alliance with the HNS will likely mean at least one seat in the parliament.

PGS has supported the Racan government's progressive policies, although not formally a member of the coalition.

¶22. (C) Croatian Slavonia - Baranya Party (SBSH). Another micro-party, this time from the agricultural heartland of eastern Croatia. This party, although generally more conservative than PGS, has formed a pre-election alliance with the HNS in one electoral district.

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